The Fight for the Village

Southern Afghanistan, 2010

Lieutenant Colonel Brian Petit, U.S. Army

This article is dedicated to Master Sergeant Mark Coleman, U.S. Army Special Forces, killed in action in an Afghan village on 2 May 2010.

Lieutenant Colonel Brian Petit is the director of the U.S. Army Irregular Warfare Fusion Cell at Fort Leavenworth, KS. He commanded Special Operations Task Force South (2nd Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group) in southern Afghanistan in 2010.

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PHOTO: An Afghan Local Police member patrols near his village accompanied by a U.S. Special Forces soldier, Kandahar Province, 2010. (Photo courtesy of author)

AFTER NINE YEARS of war in Afghanistan, a predominant societal structure—the Afghan village—continues to challenge counterinsurgency strategists and practitioners who seek to gain and maintain influence among Afghanistan's rural population. The Afghan village is difficult to understand, complicated to engage, and a challenge to meaningfully influence. In the past year, the military's most studied and experienced U.S. special operations forces and Afghan partners achieved considerable—though reversible–successes in the complex human and physical environments of select villages.[1] This essay offers observations from Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command—Afghanistan (CFSOCC-A) village stability operations conducted in southern Afghanistan in 2010.[2] Five detailed observations were consistent among ten separate teams living in southern Afghan villages.[3] They illuminate the role of the village in protecting the Afghan population.

Afghanistan's rural villages contain the very population that both the insurgents and counterinsurgents seek to influence, inspire, or intimidate. A rural-based insurgency is underway in Afghanistan.[4] Approximately 70 percent of Afghanistan's population of 32 million resides in rural areas or villages, well outside of urban population centers.[5] In southern Afghanistan, most live in agrarian village clusters sustained by seasonal crops fed by flood irrigation. Even major southern Afghanistan cities like Qalat and Tarin Kowt are more village-like than urban, retaining their rural features even in densely populated areas. The future of Afghanistan may not be won in the villages, but history teaches us that it will not be won without them.

Villages range from a dozen inhabitants to over 1,000. Most are sustained by subsistence farming and lack basic services such as electricity, sewage, purified water, or formal education. Authority resides in the traditional social networks: tribes, clans, kinships, and family. Tribal affiliation and family relationships shape belief systems and motivate behaviors. Villages

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are patriarchal. Family life is structured around the *qalat* (citadel)—a mud-walled compound that serves both to contain (women, possessions, goats) and to repel (intruders and the public). Afghan village life is simple and Hobbesian—nasty, brutish, and short. The life expectancy for both men and women is 44.[6]

Abdul Salam Zaeef, the author of *My Life with The Taliban*, starts his 2010 book with this telling sentence: "I was born in the small village of Zangiabad in 1968."[7] Zaeef defines himself by his village first, his family next, and then his lifelong affiliation with the Taliban. Loosely confederated villages such as Zaeef's hometown of Zangiabad (a highly contested village) west of Kandahar City are the typical rural village groupings that constitute districts. Many districts form a province. There are 34 provinces in Afghanistan.

Influencing Afghanistan's village populations remains a key component of the Taliban's strategy to prolong the conflict, drain international resources, test the will of the United States, and deny access to the rural population, which usually rejects the Taliban ideology. To implement this strategy, the Taliban co-opt and coerce villagers outside the reach of Afghan government protection capabilities. The Taliban and associated criminal enterprises burrow into village clusters, becoming difficult to identify and even more problematic to decisively defeat. Villages are "insurgent camouflage." They are remote, culturally indistinguishable to outsiders, self-sustaining, and they provide nearly endless littoral nesting grounds for insurgents to roost in and operate from. The antibody to Taliban encroachment—the villager–is at great risk if he resists. *The essence of village stability operations is supporting village leaders and village inhabitants who have the will to resist Taliban hegemony.*

In Pashtun-dominated southern Afghanistan, the majority of villages and their attendant districts remain outside the influence of the government's civil and security services. Geographic challenges alone complicate the process of positively influencing village life. Yet, villagers remain the "swing voters" whose allegiances we and the Taliban seek. Convincing the villagers to resist Taliban encroachment actively and passively is critical to stabilizing Afghanistan.

Village Stability

Village stability operations are executed by small, combined teams built around a Special Forces

Photo courtesy of author

Afghan and U.S. local defense teams rely on motorcycles for mobility, survivability, and easy access to the population, Arghandab District, Kandahar Province, 2010.

Operational Detachment-Alpha.[8] Village stability operations employ a bottom-up methodology that strengthens and stimulates village social structures to provide security, enable development, and nurture local governance. Village stability operations reinforce village elders, tribal elders, and mullahs who are anti-Taliban and *principally* pro-government. The goal is to improve stability inside lasting social structures and create zones that are inhospitable to insurgent overtures or intimidation. We reach a strategic decisive point when we link up these villages to their districts and provinces and establish meaningful connections to the national government.

Field Observations and Challenges

The observations that follow come from U.S. Army Special Forces team members who lived—fully embedded—in multiple southern villages from January to August 2010. I will briefly summarize each observation and follow with an expanded discussion.

● Respect and authority are the precursors to achieving influence. Meaningful and lasting progress in Afghan villages can only come from a position of real or perceived power informed by cultural understanding, tactical competence, and financial development.

● Afghanistan's culture of resistance is pervasive. Pashtun concepts of shame and honor are often the impetus to fight. Channeling these impulses to work against the insurgency is achievable and effective.

● Keeping the insurgent "mentality" away from the population is often easier to do than keeping out the insurgents.

● We should place community kinships above tribal kinships. Community kinships are less divisive in binding villages to their districts and their local leaders. Ideally, tribal engagement is a means to progress into community engagement.

● The desire to advance oneself as an individual or within one's tribe often thwarts collective progress. Corrupt or unproductive individual or tribal aspirations can hinder efforts to develop communal benefits.

Respect and Authority

Gaining and maintaining universal respect and authority among the population enables security, development, and governance in the villages. In rural Afghanistan, demonstrating sufficient cultural understanding while exhibiting the ability to act powerfully earns respect. Personal relationships are paramount, but they must grow from a position of strength. Personal interactions must stimulate a villager's belief that this alliance will prove beneficial to him, his family, his clan, or his tribe. Achieving *willful dominance* and *cultural understanding* in a persistently productive, calibrated manner is perhaps the most challenging tactical feat at the village level.

To undermine Taliban influence in the villages, we must supplant their dominance and break their monopoly on authority. Villages and villagers principally aim to survive and prosper. To do so, they will visibly align or subjugate themselves to the dominant, lasting presence. Vulnerable villagers want to improve their survivability and will adjust their moral, political, or ideological preferences to side with the perceived dominant party. In village stability operations, the trifecta of authority, tactical competence, and economic benefits promotes sustainable progress.

In the Taliban-saturated Zerekoh Valley in Shindand Province, U.S. Special Forces teams achieved a "breakthrough" with a series of actions that demonstrated willful authority, tactical competence, and economic benefits.

First, the teams made strong first impressions on the villagers in initial village shuras. The small things counted—attentive listening; recognition of elders, *khans* (landowners), and *maliks* (local chieftans); knowledge of local issues; simple expressions of experience and wisdom in life and in combat; and measured offers of assistance. Beards and

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A district Afghan police officer communicates with local elders during an Afghan-run medical seminar designed for rural constituents, Zabul Province.

clothing were a small, but not insignificant, contributing factor. Initially, beards produced immediate visual stimuli suggesting maturity, wisdom, male-aggression, and familiarity: important first impression signals. Ultimately, a soldier armed with basic local language phrases and interpersonal skills can accelerate the critical cultural and human connections.[9] A soldier must make a strong enough initial impression to convince a villager to override the obvious hazards of cooperating with coalition forces, Afghan forces, or both. Villagers want to be winners, but we must incentivize their willingness to expose themselves and invite violence into their lives.

On 8 May 2010, after we had established basic village defenses in Zerekoh Valley over a period of weeks, the Taliban directly attacked the locals and Special Forces teams. Our response—with its speed, violence of action, and effective but discretionary use of indirect fires—was a defining moment for the village. Tactical firefights rarely produce lasting victories, but they can demonstrate the competent use of lethal force. The Special Forces teams viewed the tactical firefight of 8 May 2010 as a decisive moment in coalescing the support of the villagers.

The people must believe it is in their interest to resist Taliban threats. They will only do this if they believe that a more dominant *and lasting* authority will prevail. The initial move to achieve this belief was to demonstrate power, lethality, or coercion that supplanted the insurgents as the strongest influence in the area. When the villagers perceived such strength, *maliks* (village elders) became responsive to measures like construction projects, representative shuras, and conflict resolution mechanisms. In the Zerekoh Valley, *destruction* was the catalyst for *construction.*

Establishing a position of influence is achievable in any village. The challenge is to maintain influence over wide areas, offer physical protection for villages and their inhabitants, and transfer that influence to a reasonably capable local malik, Afghan Security Force commander, or local defense chief. No matter the immediate benefits from Afghan government security, villagers will remain "fence sitters" if we do not counter the Taliban presence readily, visibly, and consistently. This is the most challenging tactical feat in rural Afghanistan. Long-term success in the village means establishing an effective, persistent, and reliable local (preferably governmental) presence that convinces villagers to actively resist the Taliban.

Culture of Resistance

Afghanistan has a well-documented culture of violence and armed resistance against outside influences. Xenophobic attitudes are prevalent, and they lend unpredictability to even the most benign engagements. Given this premise, how does the culture of resistance contribute to a successful counterinsurgency campaign?

For many years in the Zerekoh Valley, Taliban fighters were *mujahedeen*. They adopted the name of the well-respected freedom fighters of the 1980s that repelled the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. In the Zerekoh Valley in spring 2010, the villagers resisted the Taliban, which lead to an increase in Taliban attacks and population control measures. The escalation of violence caused open resentment

of the Taliban. The villagers bravely took up arms and soon it was their turn to assume the honorific of *mujahedeen*. The villagers came to regard the Taliban—and not U.S. troops—as the outsiders.

Once a village defense force establishes itself as a real competitor of the Taliban, security will increase. The challenge in empowering local village defenders is maintaining the force as a viable defense-oriented mechanism that protects the population. Village defense groups must focus on limited village defense yet have the training and equipment to win tactical engagements with well-armed insurgents.

When the Pashtun "culture of resistance" mobilizes against the Pashtun Taliban, the conditions are present to support local defense groups led by Afghans. Development, representative shuras, and other progressive measures can take root and grow. Conversely, if the Pashtun "culture of resistance" regards the coalition or the Afghan government as the enemy, the insurgents, "accidental guerrillas," and locals alike will thwart any attempts at progress.[10]

Separating the Insurgent "Mentality" from the Populace

In many villages, the insurgents *are* the population. Success is less about separation than the cessation of insurgent activities from an individual or kinship group. Inserting the word "mentality" into the often quoted phrase, "separating the insurgents from the people," was popularized by a Special Forces sergeant working with pacified insurgents in the strategic Arghandab River Valley north of Kandahar City.[11] The sergeant was emphasizing that long-term effects must come from convincing villagers to stop giving passive or active support to anti-government violence. The phrase "insurgent mentality" wisely recognizes that the insurgency is not monolithic, and that many factors motivate anti-coalition sentiment—political aims, tribal infighting, economic rewards, and shame or honor motivations.

Many effective insurgents came from the villages in Southern Afghanistan. The insurgent commanders and sub-commanders were members of local tribes. The individual fighters and auxiliary forces were the sons of prominent tribesmen. In these cases, separating the population from the

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insurgency is impossible. However, keeping the insurgent from pursuing insurgent actions and ideals is attainable.

We need to understand and address intractable rifts between locals, including tribal divisions, blood feuds, and internal power struggles. It is necessary to keep differences under control and focus the animosity of the population against the insurgency and its destructive effects. Adirah village adopted the outlook that violent actions were a scourge on the community. This powerful cultural attitude led to fewer attacks in many villages in the highly volatile Arghandab River Valley.

In Adirah, jump-starting a representative shura helped to reinstall local governance councils that had been attrited over the past 30 years of conflict. The key to generating momentum in these shuras was the skilled introduction of development. A Special Forces team sponsored community elders who executed over 55 small projects in their village cluster (total cost of $250,000). The locally run projects—culverts, irrigation, retaining walls, foot bridges—produced clear benefits to the community and quickly galvanized the locals against insurgent encroachment. The community planned, organized, and built each project. The Special Forces team utilized Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) monies with a "shura to shovel" turnaround of two days. The rapid use of CERP funds to support local project nominations solidified the credibility of the elders (and the coalition). Critically, projects were nominated and started in hours and days, not weeks or months.[12]

The Adirah CERP projects were community-run and required approval from the district. While the Arghandab district government was not yet responsible for assigning or managing these projects, seeking district approval exercised the "connective tissue" between self-empowered locals and their district officials. The insurgents refrained from targeting the projects village elders supported.

Insurgents still exist in Adirah. However, community and tribal cohesion has served as a powerful deterrent leading to reduced insurgent attacks and increased employment. This dynamic also set the conditions for the "silent reintegration" of insurgents into the community. Soon, insurgent violence abated and discreet elder-to-insurgent dialogues resumed. This stimulated short-term pacification and opened the way for a lasting reintegration of local insurgents.

Community Kinships over Tribal Kinships

We should value community kinships over tribal kinships. Community kinships emphasize connectivity through vocation, hardships, religion, or community-based commonalities. There may be multiple tribes within a single community or small village. Community kinships are less divisive in binding villages to their districts and their local leaders. Pure tribal engagement is often a requirement, but we should view it as a means to progress into collective community engagement. The most effective engagements involve residence or community-centered *qawms* (social kinships), which are not dogmatically oriented around tribes.

In the violent district of Khas Oruzgan in northeast Oruzgan Province, one U.S. Special Forces team with multiple rotations into the area continued to experience poor results when assembling leaders from more than one tribe. Although it was counterintuitive, the team assisted the district governor in holding separate, tribally oriented shuras to establish trust, confidence, and consensus on major security, development, and governance issues. Leaders felt safe to express themselves candidly in these forums. The "disaggregating" effect of these separate tribal shuras ultimately enabled a successful assembly of multiple tribes, managed by capable elders who could promote common goals without the specter of perceived tribal advancement.

In Khas Oruzgan, insurgent violence stunted conflict resolution, so the district governor altered the approach to assembling *shuras* or *jirgas* and simply gathered a group of respected elders and citizens to represent their villages. Consequently, in the spring of 2010, insurgent attacks decreased significantly, and new areas became open for commerce.

However, a successful village stability program such as the Khas Oruzgan effort will have limited effects when the district level governance is not capable or willing to continue the forward progress. When villages seek aid from a dysfunctional, undermanned, or corrupt district center, progress becomes tenuous, and islands of security become vulnerable to anti-government influence.

Tribal engagement is a prerequisite to community engagement. Without meaningful dialogue with tribal influencers, efforts to promote progress will meet with frustration. The embedded U.S. teams viewed tribal engagement as critical, but not a strategy in itself. Even in areas where provincial and district governments are absent, it is crucial to link productive acts of local governance to a broader Afghan government concept.

In practice, the nuances of human relations are remarkably challenging, and it takes time to understand the complexities of tribe and subtribe dynamics. Assessing local ties and establishing personal relationships are critical before taking any power-altering actions. Even the best choices can produce ancillary negative outcomes, alter power balances, and elevate individuals at the expense of institutions. We can mitigate such risks by consistently reinforcing community kinships over tribal kinships.

Gauging Motivations for Advancement

A critical part of assessing a village's status is gauging motivation. Among the villages engaged

Photo courtesy of author

A Special Forces village advisor confers with a village elder on a construction project, Arghandab District, Kandahar Province, 2010.

in southern Afghanistan, groups supporting village stability initiatives fell into two categories: 1) a dominant tribe or group strong enough to endure insurgent attacks, or 2) a disenfranchised tribe or group seeking to ascend in the power structure by aligning itself with powerful Afghan or coalition partners. A third group was present, although rarely: those committed to combating the Taliban for ideological or personal reasons.

The assessment of motivations is critical to effective engagement. All individuals and groups are attempting to increase their stature, resources, power, and influence. We must gauge their motivations and assess the risks they are taking. How will the population view this? Who will move closer to the Afghan government? Who will potentially move farther away? Are the improvements in security, governance, and development worth committing some of our limited resources?

Historically, alliances forged for security and survival in Afghanistan have usually been pragmatic ones. The Alikozai tribe's calculated capitulation to the Taliban in 1994 is one example of Afghan political survivalism. One must see beyond the obvious "willing" individuals and groups and examine their motives for cooperation. In 2010, Special Forces teams assessed certain villages in critical districts as unsuitable or unfeasible for a variety of reasons: too violent, insufficient leadership, caustic tribal imbalances, or unwilling to support the coalition and Afghan priorities.

Few villages exist that openly support the Afghan government. Identifying groups that are *principally* or *potentially* pro-Afghan government is a solid start, given Afghanistan's pervasive mistrust of centralized government. If locals genuinely desire to resist the Taliban and to organize themselves to improve security and progress, then the opportunity exists to connect them to their district government, and by extension, to the provincial and national governments.

Transitioning

In July 2010, Afghan President Hamid Karzai approved the Afghan Local Police program as a formalized security initiative under the Afghan Minister of the Interior. By design, the initial Afghan Local Police programs are grown from successful village stability operations. This ensures that the governance, development, and security conditions are suitable to sustain and manage trusted local police. Currently, Afghan Local Police growth is contingent upon village stability operations to shape —then verify—that the police program can be implemented without excessive risk. This is encouraging progress, although all sides acknowledge that the rewards carry risks. Building credible Afghan Local Police alters economic and social balances, inevitably shifting social status and honor quotients. However, pushing back Taliban encroachment requires taking such risks now, or suffering an irreversible loss of faith from rural populations. By stabilizing villages with small-scale civic improvements and helping the local police program maintain security, the Afghan government and the International Security Assistance Force have staked their success on winning in select rural populations.

Afghan National Security Forces continue to field Afghan Special Forces teams that partner with U.S. Special Forces teams to transition the gains won within the villages to Afghan civil and military leadership. Village stability operations are not exclusively designed for U.S. or Afghan Special Operations Forces. To execute village stability in remote areas requires mature, small teams able to operate independently with inherent force protection capabilities, intelligence personnel, sufficient combat power, austere logistics, civic and medical capabilities, and a variety of mobility options. Equally, we must consistently follow through on our commitment to a village. Any coalition and Afghan force that possesses these capabilities is suitable to help the Afghan government stabilize villages.

Protecting the Population from the Inside Out

Southern Afghanistan's predominately Pashtun population has existed under multiple governmental regimes in the past 25 years, and few of them have had effective outreach into the rural areas. Villages usually provided their own security and governance within the larger and generationally volatile swings of centralized government. The villages will accept the basic provision of security and justice as the mark of a competent ruling power. Village stability operations aim to satisfy these basic requirements with credible and legitimate Afghans from those very communities.

Photo courtesy of author

Urban and rural village compounds have high walls that reduce their street-level visibility, Kandahar Province, 2010.

The five observations above describe the challenges of *how* to protect the population in the villages. The solutions we derived from these observations were imperfect and non-uniform. Only solutions that matched each village's capability, personality, and communal will were workable and sustainable.

The Afghan government and coalition counterinsurgency strategy emphasizes protecting the population. In remote areas, populations too often protect themselves by collaborating with the Taliban. The "fight for the village" means changing this predilection by offering viable alternatives that bolster village stability and foster connections to the Afghan government. Village stability works "backwards." We establish stability in the villages first, then connect village governance to the districts and the provinces. Investing in Afghanistan's villages is analytically rigorous, socially tiring, and highly dangerous. Yet, the rewards are worth the risk, for in combating Afghanistan's rural insurgency, we cannot "win" without support from the villages. *MR*

NOTES

1. For forces under Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command-Afghanistan (CFSOCC-A) and Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan (CJSOTF-A), Afghan partnerships range from Afghan Kandaks (army battalions) to village defenders currently training and forming Afghan Local Police units. Some Special Forces teams in villages begin with no partnerships, with the aim of assisting village leaders in raising local defense units.

2. Village Stability Operations (VSO) in Afghanistan has also been called community defense initiative (CDI) and local defense initiative (LDI). A similar SOF-sponsored, locals-based program in Wardak Province was named Afghan Public Protection Program (AP3). These programs have a variety of precursors from U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.

3. The village experiences for this paper were derived from teams living and working in the following provinces: Oruzgan, Helmand, Shindand, Kandahar, and Zabul.

4. Seth Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*, RAND Counterinsurgency Study, Volume 4, 2008. There is a consensus among academicians and analysts that Afghanistan's insurgency is principally rural-based.

5. Accurate population statistics are difficult to ascertain, and vary widely. Sources include Asia Foundation estimates, <www.asiafoundation.org> and U.S. State Department website, <www.state.gov>.

6. See <www.state.gov>.

7. Abdual Salam Zaeef, *My Life with the Taliban* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2008), 1.

8. Village stability operations are also performed by U.S. Marine Corps Special Operations and Naval Special Operations units operating under CFSOCC-A and CJSOTF-A, though the preponderance of these operations, and my experiences, were with U.S. Army Special Forces.

9. Several of the U.S. Special Forces teams initiated village stability operations with no Afghan partners. The growth of the Afghan Special Forces is enabling the Afghans to take the lead in the villages, with U.S. Special Operations Forces advising.

10. Reference to David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

11. Separating the insurgent "mentality" from the population was a phrase used by Sergeant First Class B. Bowlin on ODA 1234 in the Arghandab District.

12. Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) remains a highly effective program. The difficulty in using CERP is often meeting the requirements to appoint and train qualified two-soldier teams, securing appropriate cash-on-hand for every team, and using the CIDNE database to nominate projects. To run decentralized village stability operations effectively required over 35 CERP Teams (field ordering officer and paying agent) in one Special Forces battalion. This also required the distribution of cash to each team, ahead of time, to allow the team to use the money as a "weapon system."